English in the Era of Globalisation

Implications for Research Methodologies for English Language Arts

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Increasing globalisation and the increasing mobility of populations has become truisms in discussions of education, and their impact on educational systems and practices is widely acknowledged. As Luke notes:

One of the consequences of economic globalisation is the relative permeability of borders and accelerated, though uneven, flows of bodies across geographical and political boundaries. New population demographics threaten the stability of large-scale educational systems as linguistic and ethnic monocultures. (2003, p. 133)

Such forces have changed the nature of teaching and learning and necessitate an increased engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity. In addition to processes of mobility, the use of technologies has disconnected communication and social networks from local contexts in ways that allow and even require individuals to develop affiliations and identities that cut across national, ethnic and linguistic lines (Gee, 2000a, 2000b; Lam, 2006). The consequence is that language practices are constituted transnationally. This is not simply a case of the integration of speakers of English as an additional language into wider patterns of English language communication but also involvement of people in complex multilingual contexts, such as those found in anime fan-sites (Black, 2007; Thorne & Black, 2009). This chapter aims to examine some issues which globalisation and increasing mobility have for research in English language arts and the considerations which researchers need to make in developing research designs for complex multilingual contexts. It will argue that the key issue in research design is not so much methodology as a reconceptualization of what constitutes research practice in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity.

The Monolingual Habitus and Its Effects on Research

The Nature of the Monolingual Habitus Linguistic and cultural plurality has always been a reality. However, after the rise of the idea of the nation state, such plurality ceased to be considered a normal feature of a nation and nation-states have often been understood in terms of linguistic and cultural homogeneity (see Hobsbawn, 1991). This underlying myth of the linguistic and cultural uniformity of the nation-state permeates the structures, forms and contents of school systems and has had an impact on the theory and methodology of educational research as has been demonstrated for example for various countries in Europe by Gogolin (1994), Kroon and Vallen (1994) and Vermes (1998). In the context of English language arts, Gutiérrez (2001, p. 564) has similarly noted that in curriculum “Language arts was characterised primarily by its focus on developing the English Language Arts to English speaking children.” Bernhardt has observed in the research context that:

first language reading research is almost exclusively “English-language based”; second language research is conducted likewise…. The overwhelmingly English-speaking North American/ British/Australian literacy industry that drives teacher education policy and academic publishing certainly plays a role. Further, the overwhelming numbers of English speakers in positions of academic power across the globe drive the agenda that focuses on English as the sole language of interest. (2003, p. 112)

Such comments reveal a potential conflict within English language arts between a tendency to equate English with language, seeing “English language” as the underlying construct, and seeing English as only a component of language.

Gogolin (1994) has termed this overwhelming orientation to a single language a “monolingual habitus”—that is a habit of mind in which existing linguistic and cultural diversity is rendered invisible in research practices. Within an English language context, Liddicoat and Crichton (2008) identify a number of characteristics of the monolingual habitus that have potential implications for the ways in...
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The Monolingual Habitus and the Multilingual Learner

Budash and Bardenschlager (2008) have identified the prevailing monolingualism of educational practice as one of the key impediments to research into language practices among multilingual learners. In the research context, the monolingual habitus is manifested in research approaches which consider all learners as speakers of a particular language either without reference to the linguistic diversity of actual student populations, or by characterising students who are not speakers of the majority language as defective speakers of the language or as in deficit with reference to other students. In particular, notions of uniformity often render invisible diversity in the lived experience of students or reduce diversity to a series of overarching, static and undifferentiated categories of difference. Luke notes that “[M]uch of the literature on multiculturalism tends to treat all multilingual ‘ethnicities’ of a piece, without due attention to social class, location and history” (2003, p. 135). Bernhardt (1991) has observed that in descriptions of research methodologies learners of English are frequently treated as an undifferentiated whole and researchers fail to report (or to discover?) the internal complexity of the category “learners of English” except in terms of proficiency levels. The homogenisation of learners of English has frequently been deployed in both research and policy contexts to construct labelling of English learners as either “other” or as “deficit other.” For example, in Australia it has been common practice to identify learners as either ESB (English-Speaking Background) or NESB (Non-English-Speaking Background) constructing a view of the learner (and in research, of the research participant) in terms of the presence of absence of English as the only relevant variables differentiating between groups. The result is to consider learners only in relation to English monolingualism as the uncontested linguistic norm and to view competence in other languages only as instances of an absence of or deficit in English. Similar issues occur with other group labels such as LEP (Limited English Proficiency) or LOTE (Languages other than English) which construct aspects of multilingualism in terms of relationship to English as norm. As Luke notes, “In countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia…literacy and language education continues to routinely categorise the multilingual subject as ‘Other’, as afterthought, exception, anomaly, and ‘lack’” (2003, p. 135).

Such namings represent not only categorisations of people around their access to English but also construct the field of knowledge on particular ways—that research legitimately focuses either on those that have English or those that do not. Such labels draw boundaries between languages as inherent to the understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. The investigation of English as unitary object presupposes the exclusion of “not English” and with the consequent potential to segment the linguistic repertoires of the individual in ways which obscure the interrelationships of languages as an organic whole for the bilingual or multilingual individual. To speak more than one language is not to incarnate within oneself multiple equivalents to the monolingual native-speaker but rather to have a language capacity which is spread differentially over two or more languages according to experiences and needs (Hornberger, 1994, 2004). Where research focuses only on one aspect of the language repertoire of such individuals it takes something that is part of an integrated whole and treats it as if it existed only in isolation (Heinz, 2001). This means that access to English has the potential to become a discriminating factor which masks other features of the learner and potentially renders them unknown and unknowable.

The monolingual habitus therefore ignores the complex linguistic lifeworlds of learners or reduces the complexity to a deficiency. It also ignores the interrelations between the languages in the learners’ linguistic repertoires in the linguistic and cultural practices in which they engage, including those involved in learning itself. As a result, linguistic and cultural diversity is constructed as external to the research context and without significance in understanding the research question framed in terms of language. In research methodologies in English language arts, the monolingual habitus is most noticeably present in research methodologies which use English as the sole vehicle for data collection without establishing whether the choice of English is in fact the most relevant language for some or all of the research participants to use or how the use of English positions learners within the context of the research project. Choice of language in any educational context, including in research design, “is about which identities students can take up in classrooms and which identity will be valued. Language choice is not solely an educational choice but is always a political issue linked to mechanisms of social control” (Gutiérrez, 2001, p. 566; see also Woolard, 1998).

A reflective research design is therefore one which considers how language, which is often the focus of investigation itself, positions the research participants, impacts on their
identities and agent positions and (re)produces discourses of marginalisation or deficit.

The focus on English is often the result of a default—English is the only language the researcher is able to assess the learner because the researcher does not have access to the language of the learner. However the decision by the researcher to homogenise the language practices of a group of learners to conform to the language practices available to the researcher is rarely problematised in discussions of research methodologies and, moreover, is not seen as needing to be problematised. That is, the convergence of language practices on the language of the researcher (in this case English) is naturalised and the removal of the language practices of learners themselves from the research agenda is masked by this process of naturalising English. Aspects of the learners’ linguistic repertoire are a priori deemed irrelevant to the research process not because of a theorised position on the relationships between language practices exercised through different languages but because of their inaccessibility to the researcher. For Bernhardt (2003, p. 114) this reduction of what constitutes relevant research information is a grave flaw in research method: “When researcher deficiencies interfere with the ability to provide trustworthy data, the entire research enterprise becomes suspect.”

An Ecological View of Language as the Research Context in English Language Arts

The Nature of Linguistic Ecologies An alternative to the monolingual habitus is the recognition that languages exist within linguistic ecologies. The concept of linguistic ecologies was pioneered by Haugen (1972), who uses the metaphor of the ecosystem to understand the roles and relationships of languages with the communicative practices and linguistic repertoires of communities and individuals. Haugen argues that language ecologies involve both psychological interrelationships—between languages known and used by individuals—and sociological interrelationships—between members of a society in which particular languages are used. The focus on “language” in language ecologies is however misleading as to the nature of such ecologies—it is not just languages that have such interrelationships but varieties of language (e.g. standard and non-standard varieties, regional and social dialects, etc.). That is, all differentiated linguistic codes used by individuals and/or communities are salient elements of a linguistic ecology.

The interrelationships that exist in the ecology influence which languages are used for which purposes, how languages are valued and how they relate to other value systems, what languages represent for users and communities, and the perceived viability of speaking particular languages in particular societies. This means that investigating only one language or one language variety purely in isolation from the other languages and varieties of the individual or of the society denies the interrelationships between languages and marginalises aspects of language repertoires.

One problem facing researchers in English language arts is the position of the English that is being researched in the linguistic ecologies which form the research context. Within educational systems, the interrelationships between languages are inevitably subjected to pressure as education is fundamentally a linguistic act and is intrinsically tied to and provides prestige for particular (standardised) language varieties. That is, English language education is a vehicle for the reproduction of Standard English in ecologies which may be characterised by multilingualism and/or multiple varieties of English. Outside school contexts, the standard language is only one component of the ecology, although in schooling it is often represented as the entire ecology or as the only valid member of it.

A second problem for the researcher lies in the symbolic load borne by English within its ecology. This symbolic load is potentially extremely complex. At one level, there is the symbolic capital which accrues to mastery of the variety of English privileged by the schooling system (see Bourdieu, 1982). This symbolic capital means that Standard English is frequently considered as an objective good and the acquisition of the variety can be enforced through schooling because it is so considered. However, Standard English may have other symbolic loadings within it ecologies. Languages are not simply codes to be deployed for communication, they are also markers of identity. This means that a particular language variety, such as Standard English, may be perceived as a language of assimilation, of disempowerment or of marginalisation or it may be seen as a threat to identity. In such cases, the acquisition of Standard English would not be considered an objective good and its place in schooling may effectively threaten the value seen in schooling delivered in and reproducing the status of that language. Fordham (1999), for example, reports that the African American high school students in her study actively resist the requirement to learn to speak and communicate in Standard English, through their adherence to African American vernacular English. She argues that the students’ refusal to discontinue their use of vernacular English as the language of communication while at or in school, and their wholesale avoidance of the standard dialect in most other contexts is an act of resistance to an externally imposed norm. She sees language as a site of contestation where the language practices rewarded by schooling are seen as threats to identity, and a language variety is rejected because of the threat it poses that identity. She notes that rejection of Standard English does not necessarily equate with an inability to use the variety, as the students she investigated did use the standard when it was relevant to what they wished to achieve. Rather, the students did not view the standard as their language, but the language of another, alien group. Students who adopted Standard English in order to succeed therefore needed to maintain dual linguistic identities, adopting the standard when needed but otherwise rejecting it as a linguistic norm. The students’ language practices were perceived by external others as in deficit—the students’ failure to use Standard English was generally understood.
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as incompetence and an inability to perform a culturally sanctioned task by the dominant, Standard English-speaking educational system.

Stroud and Wee (2007) similarly argue that the language practices of English language schooling in Singapore marginalise the multilingual identities of students and lead to negative stereotyping of Singaporean ways of speaking both in English and in other languages. In this case too, students resort to transgressive language use to protect and reaffirm their identities. Such studies reveal a fundamental tension in educational research between evaluations of language use seen from the perspective of a validated norm in isolation from other the language ecology and the symbolic load carried by languages in the ecology.

Recognising the Place of Language Ecologies in Research

Investigating language from an ecological perspective involves recognising the various impacts of context on what is being investigated and the ways in which interrelationships between language, languages and contexts construct both the situation under investigation and the action of investigation itself. Such ecological understandings of language education have been recognised in some language education contexts, especially where education promotes the learning of an exogenous language. Mühlhäusler (2000) has articulated a number of characteristics of what he calls “ecological thinking” in relation to language education, which includes:

- giving consideration not just to system internal factors but wider environmental ones;
- being aware of the dangers of monoculturalism and loss of diversity; and
- being aware of those factors that sustain the health of language ecologies.

That is, the researcher needs to be mindful of conducting research on any one language, of the place held by that language in its linguistic ecology, of the interrelationships it has with other languages, and of the potential impact on the linguistic ecology of both the teaching of this language and the research conducted on it.

The challenge that globalisation poses for English language arts research is to develop research designs and methodologies which recognise the ecological nature of language and the potentially complex place of the English language within learners’ language ecologies. As Luke argues:

At issue is not whether and how we can recover English education as unitary field and profession, at best a theoretically and industrially vexed task. The question is how we might reinvent it in relation to an understanding of its own social and cultural complexity and dynamics. (2004, p. 87)

One way for research to engage with such dynamics is to recognise and make space for hybrid language practices available in learners own language ecologies and to validate these as part of an English language arts focus (Gutiérrez et al., 1999). For Gutiérrez (2001, p. 567), the concern for hybridity reflects a desire to put “language back into language arts.” An example of a research focus on English language arts which emphasises language can be seen in Shopen (2009). Shopen reports a study of classroom interaction in which an indigenous teacher teaching in Australia’s Torres Strait Islands used hybrid language practices to engage learners in sophisticated language practices. The teacher introduced the learners to a song in Kalaw Lagaw Ya, a local indigenous language, then in Torres Strait Creole. This was then followed by a game in which students rolled a dice to select a language—Kalaw Lagaw Ya, Torres Strait Creole, or Standard Australian English. The teacher would then give them a line of the song in a language other than that shown on the dice, and the students would reproduce the song in the language shown. In the case of Standard Australian English, this was an original creation as the song had not been presented in this language. The learners’ discussion largely focused around how to represent local realities in English. The learners were engaged in complex linguistic and metalinguistic work which allowed them to draw on their entire language repertoire in constructing and communicating meanings. Most notably, non-indigenous Standard Australian English-speaking children in the classroom were involved in the hybrid language practices being established. The focus was thus on the hybrid language practices being constructed, not on English as a privileged language and other languages having only a supporting function. As Gutiérrez et al. note:

hybrid literacy practices are not simply code-switching as the alternation between two language codes. They are more a systematic, strategic, affiliative, and sense-making process among those who share the code, as they strive to achieve mutual understanding. (2001, p. 88)

The language practices described in Shopen’s (2009) research exemplify this distinction and reveal ways in which learners’ language repertoires can become fully engaged in learning and how such learning can be captured by a research approach which views language as ecological.

Gutiérrez’s (2001; Gutiérrez et al., 1999) and Shopen’s (2009) work involves a research approach in English language arts that focuses on language as the key entry point into diverse practices, and backgrounds English as the starting point. It is in fact this change of emphasis that is needed to re-situate English language arts research within the diverse communicative practices of the globalised era. Research in English language arts in the context of cultural and linguistic pluralism requires research designs that are sensitive to the highly contextual nature of English. Such research designs need to consider as part of an overall research approach and be sensitive to:
• the status of English as potentially only one component of the meaning-making repertoire of learners;
• the cultural and linguistic situatedness of English and of the knowledges and behaviours that are associated with literate practice in English;
• the political and social situatedness of English in the value systems of learners and the ways in which this influences language practices; and
• the interrelationships between languages and literacies which exist within learners language ecologies.

Such research designs provide a contextual framing in which other aspects of research design, such as particular methodologies, can be shaped and critiqued. They also provide for the possibility of constructing research which problematise monolingual and monocultural understandings of what constitutes English language arts.

References